TITLE: The Role Of The Consultant In Intelligence Estimates

AUTHOR: Joseph R. Strayer

VOLUME: 2 ISSUE: Fall YEAR: 1958

STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE

A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.

An "ordinary citizen" appraises his participation in one "form of divination."

THE ROLE OF THE CONSULTANT IN INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATES

Joseph R. Strayer

Most consultants, at one time or another in their careers, wonder what excuse there is for their existence. They do not have continuing access to all the sources of information available to the intelligence community. They can spend only a few hours in pondering the significance of events which require days or weeks for proper analysis. Yet they are asked for advice about the most complicated problems and are expected to give their opinion on five minutes' notice. They wonder if the ritual of consultation has any more value than other forms of divination. They fear that they often seem naive and ignorant and they know that they can correct these deficiencies only by using up the time of intelligence officers who presumably have something better to do.

These feelings of guilt are made worse by the fact that the work is interesting and enjoyable. The problems are important, even if the consultant's opinion is not. However ignorant the consultant may be at the start of his career, he will find himself enlightened during his period of service. The intelligence community has not solved all its problems of style and organization but it usually succeeds in presenting essential facts in a clear, logical and compact form. There is no better way to get an education in world affairs than to act as a consultant. But these benefits only deepen the consultant's doubts. What does he give one-half so precious as what he receives?

For some kinds of consultant the answer is fairly easy. These are the men who have dined with dictators or haggled with desert sheikhs, who understand the mysteries of international finance or the intricacies of oriental politics. Such men have specialized knowledge and technical proficiency, they add to the pool of information and skill available to the intelligence

community instead of draining it. The need for this type of consultant is too obvious to require explanation; intelligence can always use expert knowledge of little-known areas or of highly technical problems.

But even these experts are often consulted on matters in which they have no special competence, and intelligence often recruits consultants who are not experts at all. They are ordinary, well-informed citizens, with some interest in foreign affairs. What special knowledge they may have is usually confined to Europe, an area on which practically everyone in Washington is an expert. It is to be hoped that they also have good sense and good judgment, but these qualities are certainly at least as common in the intelligence community as in any group of outsiders. What can such men contribute to the intelligence effort?

Since I belong to this group of consultants which has no particularly valuable expertise, my answer to this question may be somewhat self-serving. As far as I can see, the chief value of these consultants lies precisely in their lack of special knowledge. If nothing else, this makes them fairly representative of a large number of the consumers of intelligence products. Any text-book writer knows that it is fatal to ask an expert whether a particular chapter is clear and meaningful. Either he will read all his own knowledge into it and pass over loose organization and glaring omissions, or he will quarrel with every generalization and load it with unnecessary detail. The best critic of the first draft of a text-book is an intelligent person who has only a sophomore's knowledge of the field. In the same way, the best critic of an intelligence paper is probably the consultant who has only a general knowledge of the topic. If he misinterprets a key passage, if he is not convinced by the reasoning, if he feels that some essential information has been omitted, then the chances are that several consumers will have the same reactions.

For example, consultants have sometimes been troubled by the indiscriminate use of the terms "left" or "leftist." Since "leftist" can mean anything from a man who believes in universal suffrage to an ardent supporter of Communism it does not help very much to be told that the cabinet of country X has "four leftist members." Consultants have also been critical of the use of technical phrases in places where non-technical

language would be just as effective. Why say "has optimum capability" when all that is meant is "works best"? The war against vagueness and jargon must be fought by all members of the intelligence community, but consultants can sometimes be used as shock troops in the struggle.

Lack of precision is not the only reason why a paper may fail to be convincing. Sometimes the argument seems too precise, it places too much weight on logic and reasonableness. Consultants may not be expert but they have usually had enough experience to realize that human beings seldom solve their problems in a completely logical and sensible way. A nice example of this clash of logic and experience occurred a few years ago when the French Assembly was debating the ratification of the ill-fated EDC agreements. The first draft of a paper shown to a group of consultants predicted with some confidence that the agreements would be ratified. The arguments for this belief were strong. They were based on intensive investigation of the attitude of the government and the deputies and they were presented with impeccable logic. But some consultants distrusted the underlying assumption that the deputies would be reasonable and follow a policy of enlightened self-interest. They argued that these qualities are rare in any political group and especially in a French political group. Their opposition may have helped to make the final draft of the paper much less certain about ratification, even though it still leaned to the wrong side.

Criticism of style and logic is an essentially negative function. The consultant can also make some positive contributions. He should not hesitate to ask obvious and even silly questions. The greatest danger in intelligence work, as indeed in all intellectual activity, is that of falling into a repetitive routine. We all know of cases in which judgments have been repeated year after year simply because they were once sanctioned by the highest authority. It does no harm to reexamine what seems obvious or to question long-established generalizations. It was, I believe, a consultant who first queried the standard passage about the USSR being unwilling to conclude an Austrian State Treaty. It was another consultant who cast doubt on the cliché that Mohammedanism and Communism are fundamentally incompatible. On the other hand, certain consultants were demonstrably wrong when

they urged that there was a real possibility that the USSR would withdraw from East Germany in return for a neutralization of the reunited country. But their question at least forced the intelligence community to examine with greater care its basic assumptions about Soviet policy in Germany and so in the end to have greater confidence in its estimate that the USSR considered it essential to retain its hold on East Germany.

Most important of all, the consultant, simply because he stands a little farther away from the trees, can sometimes see the first signs of the storms which will destroy certain portions of the forest. The intelligence community, like any other group, must assume that there will be a certain amount of continuity in the phenomena with which it deals. If it did not do so, it could not function. If precedents mean nothing, if what a statesman does today has no bearing on what he does tomorrow, then it becomes impossible to make estimates. Some of the most valuable intelligence papers ever written — those projecting the future economic growth of the USSR — were based on the assumption that existing trends would continue. But, granting all this, quantum jumps do occur in human affairs. Sudden changes can overthrow precedents and distort trends. It is hard for anyone to foresee such changes; it is particularly hard for men who have spent years watching a certain pattern of conduct emerge and apparently stabilize itself. The worst failures of intelligence in recent years have been caused by this inability to anticipate the possibility of drastic change.

I am not suggesting that greater reliance on consultants could have prevented many, or indeed any, of these failures. Like most educated men, consultants tend to overestimate the element of continuity. But sometimes consultants do not know very well what it is that is supposed to continue. Because they have fewer old facts in their minds they are more receptive to the scattered new facts which indicate that a change is coming. I can remember two incidents which illustrate this point. The first came after the death of Stalin. Certainly no one could then have predicted the exact nature of the changes which would occur. But there was a tendency on the part of some members of the intelligence community to deny that *any* change would take place. Certain consultants, on the other hand — mostly those who knew little about the Soviet

Union — felt that drastic change was inevitable, that no one but Stalin could continue Stalin's system. Their arguments may have been weak, but their hunch was right. A little more willingness to look for signs of change in the months following Stalin's death might have prevented some poor estimates.

The other case was more recent. When the Gaillard government fell in France early this year, the generally accepted opinion was that this was merely another episode in the lamentable history of the Fourth Republic. Another weak government would be formed, which would limp along until replaced by an even weaker successor. Some consultants, however, felt that this was the last straw, that the French would no longer tolerate a system which made them politically impotent. In spite of their counsel, the possibility of a Gaullist regime was still being denied by some elements of the intelligence community almost up to the moment when de Gaulle took power.

One final moral: on both occasions the consultants deferred to the greater knowledge of the experts whom they were advising and did not press their point of view very strongly. This was an abnegation of their proper function. Dissent leads to questioning of established opinion, and only through questioning established opinion can we arrive at the imperfect knowledge which is all that intelligence can ever attain.